DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 363 684 UD 029 567

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TITLE You Must Not Spank Your Children in America: Hmong Parenting Values, Corporal Punishment, and Early Childhood Intervention Programs.
PUB DATE Mar 93
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Northwest Anthropology Conference (46th, Bellingham, WA, March 1993).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Acculturation; *Corporal Punishment; Cultural Differences; *Culture Conflict; Discipline; Early Childhood Education; Early Intervention; Ethnocentrism; Family Characteristics; *Family Programs; *Hmong People; Immigrants; Minority Groups; Parent Attitudes; Parent Child Relationship; *Parenting Skills; *Social Values
IDENTIFIERS *Even Start; Language Minorities; Program Objectives

ABSTRACT

Conflicts between traditional Hmong values and traditional American parenting values are explored, drawing on the experiences of a coordinator of an Even Start program serving Hmong parents. Even Start is a state-funded early childhood intervention program with a literacy component for parents with less than an eighth grade proficiency in reading or mathematics. The goals and rationale of the program reflected an ethnocentric and patronizing attitude toward minority culture parents. Corporal punishment has been a traditional part of Hmong child rearing practice, but is generally frowned on in the United States. Some Hmong parents have reported being told that it is against the law to spank children in the United States. While Hmong parents are generally aware that corporal punishment can get them into trouble, this does not solve their problems in how to discipline children caught between two cultures. Early childhood intervention programs like Even Start put pressure on parents to conform to American middle class values, and in so doing, they tend to label the traditional Hmong values as inferior. It is argued that it should not be the job of early intervention programs to pressure parents to modify their parenting behavior and attitudes. Programs such as Even Start should offer English-as-a-Second-Language and basic skills instruction and must become culturally sensitive, particularly in view of the documented problems of the American family itself. Program personnel should educate themselves about the Hmong and other minority cultures' concepts of parenthood and the family. (Contains 7 references.) (SLD)

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"YOU MUST NOT SPANK YOUR CHILDREN IN AMERICA: HMONG PARENTING VALUES, CORPORAL PUNISHMENT, AND EARLY CHILDHOOD INTERVENTION PROGRAMS"

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by Mary Kay Hughes

for the 46th Northwest Anthropology Conference in Bellingham, WA

March, 1993

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While conducting research concerning parenting values of the Hmong for my master's thesis a few years ago, the issues corporal punishment and child abuse came up very frequently. At the same time as I was conducting my research, I took a position as coordinator of an Even Start program that served Hmong parents. Even Start is a state-funded early childhood intervention program with a literacy component for parents with less than an eighth grade proficiency level in reading or math. The Even Start program I coordinated was designed to serve refugee and immigrant parents, so it had an English as a Second Language (ESL) component. Through my experience coordinating the Even Start program and based on what Hmong parents expressed to me in interviews, it became apparent that traditional Hmong parenting values are in conflict with middle-class Anglo-American parenting values. When I use the term middle-class Anglo-American (MCAA) parenting values in this paper, I am referring to an idealized norm of American behavior: I will discuss in greater detail how early childhood intervention specialists use this notion later in the paper.

Because there was a major cultural clash between the Hmong parents and the early childhood intervention specialists regarding the issue of discipline, I have chosen to focus on that topic in this paper. I will begin by sharing excerpts of my interviews where Hmong parents speak about the issue of disciplining children and about difficulties they face as parents in the United States. Then, I will discuss the philosophy of early

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childhood intervention programs historically and of the present day Even Start programs. I believe the goals and rationale of these programs reflect an ethnocentric, patronizing attitude toward minority culture parents, which serves to invalidate traditional parenting values of minority cultures.

To illustrate the point of conflict between Hmong parents and parent educators, I would like to describe what an Even Start State Advisory Board member shared with me. She told me that an Even Start program serving refugee parents in another Washington State community reported having a problem with Hmong parents being abusive to their children. When I inquired as to the nature of the abusive behavior, she said the parent educators felt that the Hmong parents spanked their children too hard. The board member told me that the problem had been solved by informing Hmong parents that it is against the law to spank one's children in the United States. I feel that this was an inappropriate way for the parent instructors to handle their concern. It is simplistic and patronizing, and should not have been condoned by the Even Start board member. It also troubles me that, at a later date, I was able to visit the community in question and found out that the minority parents in that community were not Hmong, but lowland Laotians. This mistaken identity reflects the ignorance of minority cultures that prevails among individuals from the white middle-class. Yet they are given the power to evaluate individuals from minority cultures without so much as knowing who they are.

In carrying out my research on the Hmong concept of parenthood, parent after parent initiated a discussion about the use of corporal punishment. They all told me that they had been told not to spank their children in America. A number of parents told me that while raising children was an easy task back in Laos, it has become one of the harder tasks in the U.S.

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As one father put it, "In Laos, children [are] under parents [authority. therefore,] most children obey [their parents]; in the United States, most children do not obey." The most common problems parents cited having with their children were disobedience and lack of respect.

From the Hmong perspective, the preferred way of disciplining children is to tell them what they have done wrong, explain to them why it was wrong and warn them of the undesirable consequences that might await them if they continue to misbehave. A Hmong father explained to me that, in Laos, parents used different disciplining approaches depending on the child. He said:

> "[Some children are] hard to teach because they don't follow. [Parents] say the good way, but they don't listen. Like Pao [the informant's 4-year-old brother], he likes to do what he wants--he doesn't listen.
>
> [With some children]...if you speak softly, they will listen. So you can teach them by speaking softly to them. If you speak...[harshly to them], they get mad. [Other children, if you]...threaten to hit them, [that works],too. And they stop. [But with some children, you have to]...pick up a switch and swat them....[It] depends on the child."

Most parents I interviewed believed that using corporal punishment or the threat of corporal punishment were acceptable ways to discipline a child. All parents were aware that corporal punishment is largely looked down upon now in the United States. And nearly every parent I spoke with told me that s/he was aware that parents who spanked their children could get in trouble with authorities. All parents also differentiated between spanking a child and abusing a child. Parents reported that child abuse did occur in Laos, but that it was very rare. A woman in her twenties who has two pre-school age children and who has lived in the United States for 11 years said she had heard the following: "Some caseworkers say that Hmong are abusing their children." Her response was this: "Hmong spank their

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children as a way of disciplining...they [are] not abusing. [When] some Americans spank [their children], they really spank."

Having an awarenesss that they can get into trouble with authorities does not solve the dilemma in which Hmong parents find themselves in the U.S. The belief that they could get into trouble for disciplining their children by spanking them serves, rather, to invalidate their traditional beliefs about parental authority in parent child relations. That, coupled with the rampant problems evident in American families, leaves them very doubtful of the efficacity of American parenting styles. The following statements reflect parents' concerns about this issue.

A woman who has been in the U.S. fourteen years said this:

> "Well, I don't know...you cannot say...[any]thing, you cannot hit the children; you cannot control them. That...[gives them] too much freedom. You do something a little hard, they go to the school, and you get [into] trouble. So, I don't know. But, in our country, children must [be] under the parents[' authority]...until they...turn eighteen. [I mean that] they must do like [their] parents say."

The mother of a pre-schooler said:

> "Even little children know that Americans [are] really concern[ed] about child abuse. My daughter went to Head Start and she had a scratch on her face and she told her teacher that I did that to her. I didn't do that to her. I think maybe the cat scratch[ed] her. [It is] like she knows too much."

A man who has been in the U.S for only two years said,

> "Now, [a child has] only [to] fall down and [get] hurt; [he] go[es] to school, so [the] teacher ask[s], 'What happen[ed]...[how did this happen to you?]...[It's] hard for parents so the[ir] children will obey them... [It] makes the kids so they not afraid of the parents and they can do what they want. Kids have freedom. Parents doesn't have freedom."

Parents also reported that, in Laos, the children received the same messages about obedience and respect from their teachers as they did from their parents and the society at large. One informant told me: "Teacher[s]...[were free to] do like the parents, too." He told me that if

a teacher saw one of his/her pupils misbehaving outside of the school premises and even after hours, the teacher could punish the child. This would have been condoned behavior in Laotian society.

Having their children receive different messages in school from those they receive at home and having the understanding that they can not use corporal punishment with their children are two key areas where Hmong parents find adjustment to life in the U.S. most difficult. These issues are probably the place where Hmong parenting values are in the most conflict with middle-class Anglo-American parenting values, and they illustrate how early childhood intervention programs are in a position where they can pressure parents from minority cultures to adopt MCAA parenting behaviors.

The core assumption of the early childhood intervention movement in the 1960's was that poor children came from "deficient" home environments. (The term the movement used was "disadvantaged" children; the term that is now popular is children "at-risk".) According to Douglas Powell, professor of Child Development and Family Studies at Purdue University, the prevailing attitude of the parent education field in the sixties was that poor parents were deficient in regards to their attitudes towards achievement, their verbal interactions with their children, and their organization and the predictability of their home environments. It saw the deficiency of poor parents leading to the deficiency of their children. In that manner, parent education philosophy blamed the attitudes of poor parents for being the cause of their poverty and, ultimately, for continuing the "cycle of poverty", as it was called. (Powell 1988:2-5)

Powell states that "This prevailing assumption about the family became known as the deficit model and...increasingly was criticized as an inappropriate premise of early intervention" (Powell 1988:2). Numerous

articles have been published regarding the inappropriateness of the assumption of deficiency in the home environment of poor children (Baratz and Baratz 1972; Bernstein 1970; Valentine and Stark 1979; Zigler 1979; Powell 1988). What Powell calls the "defecit model", social scientists Joan and Stephen Baratz refer to as the "social pathologoy model". In 1972, the Baratz' aptly described the social pathology model as "institutional racism", based on its application with Blacks in early childhood intervention programs of the 1960's. According to the Baratz',

> "Liberals have eagerly seized upon the social pathology model as a replacement for the genetic inferiority model. But both the genetic model and the social pathology model postulate that something is wrong with the black American. For the traditional racists, that something is transmitted by the genetic code; for the ethnocentric social pathologists, that something is transmitted by the family. The major difference between the genetic model and the social pathology model lies in the attribution of causality, <u>not</u> in the behaviors observed as sick, pathological, deviant, or underdeveloped" (1972:189).

Essentially, the assumption of this model is that to be different from an idealized norm of middle-class Anglo-American behavior is to be inferior. According to the Baratz', the idealized norm of "American behavior", which I have been referring to as MCAA,

> "is defined operationally...[as] the way white middle-class America is supposed to behave...[The social scientist ends up]...describing Negro behavior not as it is, but rather as it deviates from the normative system defined by the white middle class" (1972:189).

In the 1970's according to Powell, the focus of program models shifted towards parents as primary recipients of services (Powell 1988:4). In the eighties, he found that the focus on parents had not decreased in educational programs for parents of at-risk children. While the biases in parent education programs of the 1980's and 1990's may have become more implicit, they still persist.

One has only to look at the stated goals of programs such as Even Start to see that little change has occurred in the philosophy of early childhood intervention programs in the past 25 years. On the one hand, the program performance standards laid out in Even Start's Request for Proposal (RFP) state that "programs should be sensitive to the social, cultural, and ethnic differences of the participants, and should respond to those differences in the program design" (Washington State Superintendent of Public Instruction Office RFP 1988:3); yet, on the other hand, the program goals and evaluation forms reflect an assumed deficiency in the parenting skills of program participants. Even Start's justification for intervention is that "Increased proficiency in the basic skills and knowledge of child development will raise parents' self esteem and increase their confidence in their ability to provide their children with a positive, supportive environment". That justification implies that Even Start expects that the program participants will have low self esteem. From my observations, low self esteem in Even Start parents was apparent only in social and educational settings dominated by middle-class Anglo-Americans. Also, Anglo-Americans unfamiliar with Southeast Asian cultures, such as that of the Hmong, easily mistake for low self esteem behavior that is culturally appropriate for Asians, such as showing deference and respect to teachers and a general deprecation of one's abilities. This is especially true when what they expect to find is low self esteem. In the Anglo-American community, self esteem is an individual matter; for Southeast Asian refugees, as Dr. Tuan Nguyen of San Francisco's Department of Public Health has remarked, "self-definition may be much more community-oriented...their 'I' is not 'I' and 'you' is not necessarily 'you,'" (quoted in Krich 1989). Thus, their sense of self esteem may also be more community-oriented.

It is instructive to note that the reason refugee parents enrolled in the Even Start program was not that they wanted to increase their knowledge of the Anglo-American view of child development. The Hmong parents wanted to increase their knowledge of English and basic arithmetic skills and were concerned primarily with meeting the financial needs of their families. The Hmong parents in Even Start had access to the traditional support network of the extended family and also to Hmong social workers through their participation in the Spokane Hmong community. They attended Even Start because it was an integral part of a survival strategy: that of learning English and survival skills for the American environment; and because the program provided transportation and daycare for their infants and toddlers while they studied.

I maintain that by offering ESL and basic skills instruction, the early childhood intervention professionals draw refugee and immigrant minority parents into Even Start programs. Unbeknownst to Hmong and other refugee and immigrant parents, the prevailing assumption of these programs is that they (the parents) have inadequate parenting skills. The endgoals of the programs are to make the parents receptive to "expert" information and advice from professional parent educators, and, ultimately, to modify parent behavior and attitudes so that they are identical with mainstream parenting norms. I argue that it should not be the job of the staff of programs like Even Start to pressure Hmong nor other minority culture parents to modify their parenting behavior and attitudes towards middle-class Anglo-American norms. However, their job should include educating themselves about the Hmong and other minority cultures' concepts of parenthood and the family. That may be the most important step that Even Start, Head Start, Home Start and all of the other "Starts" must to become "culturally-sensitive". Those

in power--that is, the white, middle class early childhood development "experts" will also need to relinquish some of their power to the people they are paid to serve.

In conclusion, let us admit that the American family itself is currently facing major problems. Given the high divorce rates, high rates of alcoholism and drug abuse by both parents and children, teenage pregnancy, suicide, domestic violence, etc., it is difficult to imagine that Hmong parents should want to give up the strengths of their family traditions and assimilate middle-class Anglo-American parenting norms. The job of parent educators should not be to accustom Hmong parents to the problems of Anglo-American families. I find no better way of expressing my feelings about this than to use a quote I read attributed to Evelyn Lee, a mental health professional who was raised in a Chinese refugee family. As she put it, "We don't want to create more popcorn--[you know,] those little yellow kernels that, under pressure, turn white. We mustn't complete a genocide by forcing people to give up their identities." (quoted in Krich 1989)

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